



When Hurting Feels Like Helping: Understanding Self-Harm and Finding Safer Ways to Cope



Created by ARC to help young people, parents and carers better understand self-harm and discover safer ways to cope with emotional pain.

Why this matters

Self-harm is often misunderstood.

Many people assume it's about wanting attention, being dramatic, or trying to shock other people. In reality, it is usually much more complicated than that.

For many young people, self-harm is not about wanting to die. It's about trying to cope. It can become a way of dealing with feelings that seem too big, too painful, too confusing, or too overwhelming to carry alone.

Sometimes self-harm can be linked to different emotions and feelings such as anxiety, stress, anger, loneliness, rejection, grief, shame, or low self-worth.

Sometimes there isn't one obvious reason at all. That can be frustrating and confusing.

You might even find yourself wondering:

- "Why do I keep doing this?"
- "Why can't I just stop?"
- "What's wrong with me?"

The truth is:

There is nothing wrong with you.

Your brain and body are trying to cope with something difficult in the best way they currently know how. That doesn't mean self-harm is helping in the long term. But it does mean there is a reason behind it.

Working with your ARC counsellor or trusted person, to understand that reason is often the first step towards recovery.



What Self-Harm Can Look Like

When people hear the words “self-harm”, they often think of physical injury.

But self-harm can take many different forms, and not all of them leave visible marks.

Self-harm isn't defined by one behaviour. It's any behaviour that someone uses to cope with emotional distress by causing harm to themselves, whether that harm is physical, emotional or psychological. For example, some may:

Put themselves
down with
negative
thoughts

Stay in unhealthy
friendships or
relationships

Deliberately
isolate
themselves from
people who care

Avoid eating
properly or
developing
unhealthy habits

Take
unnecessary
risks or engage in
dangerous
behaviours

Misuse alcohol,
drugs, vaping or
medication

Refusing comfort,
support or
kindness

Repeatedly
seeking
punishment or
believing you
deserve to suffer

Some young people, particularly those with ADHD or autism, say they find it difficult to recognise, understand or explain their feelings. When emotions feel confusing or overwhelming, self-harm can sometimes become a way of expressing what words cannot.

This guide is NOT designed to judge or tell you to "just stop".

It's here to help you understand what your self-harm is trying to communicate, why it may have become part of your life, and how you can begin to find safer ways of meeting the same need. You don't have to figure it all out today, and you don't have to do it on your own.



What's Going On Underneath?

Self-harm isn't the problem. It's usually an attempt to solve another problem.

Young people often describe feeling:



Overwhelmed



Trapped



Angry



Lonely



Numb



Ashamed



Bullied



No control

The goal isn't to remove the self-harm first. It's to understand what it's trying to do for you.

Sometimes self-harm provides:

- A release
- A distraction
- A sense of control
- A way to express pain
- A way to feel something when feeling numb
- A way to show others you're struggling when words feel impossible

The problem is that the relief doesn't last. Over time, self-harm can become the brain's "go-to" coping strategy, even when it's no longer helping.

By addressing the root cause of your pain or stress you can channel your feelings in more constructive, safe and positive ways. **ARC is here to help you.**

Understanding the self-harm cycle

Not everyone's experience of self-harm is the same. Many people describe moving through different stages:

1 Experimenting

For some people, self-harm begins through curiosity, seeing it online, hearing about it from friends, or discovering that it temporarily relieves emotional pain.

2 Habit

Over time, self-harm can become part of a routine.

It may not even provide the same relief it once did, but it feels familiar.

Some people describe reaching for it automatically whenever life becomes difficult.

3 The Cycle

Eventually, self-harm can become something you return to even when you don't fully understand why.

Not everyone experiences these stages in the same order. Some people move backwards and forwards between them. Others may only recognise one stage in themselves.

You may go weeks or months without it, then suddenly find yourself drawn back.

This doesn't mean you've failed. It means your brain has learned a coping pattern that takes time to unlearn.

Knowing which stage you're in can help you understand what kind of support might be most useful.



Recovery Isn't Ruined By One Setback

Many young people use apps such as Calm Harm and DistrACT to track progress. Some find this incredibly motivating.

But if you've gone 100 days without self-harming and then have one difficult day, those 100 days still happened. You haven't lost your progress.

A setback is information, not failure.
Recovery is rarely a straight line.

Find Your Voice

Recovery often begins with being heard. Whether it's a friend, teacher, counsellor or trusted adult, speaking up can feel frightening, but it also reduces the burden of carrying everything alone.

You deserve support before things become a crisis, you do not have to wait until things get worse and you do not have to work this out on your own.

Triggers and Warning Signs

Triggers are different for everyone. Common examples include:

- Friendship problems
- Family conflict
- Bullying
- Exam stress
- Relationship difficulties
- Feeling rejected
- Social media comparison
- Loneliness
- Big life changes



Sometimes there is no obvious trigger at all.

That can be confusing, but it doesn't make your feelings any less real.

💔 What Doesn't Help

- Keeping everything secret
- Believing you have to cope alone
- Beating yourself up for struggling
- Comparing your pain to someone else's
- Following social media content that normalises self-harm
- Telling yourself "I deserve this"



💚 What Does Help

- Talking to someone you trust
- Reducing isolation, even in small ways
- Understanding your triggers
- Creating a safety plan
- Getting professional support
- Treating yourself with the same kindness you'd show a friend



“Know Your Self-Harm”

Ask yourself...

What happens just before I self-harm?

What am I feeling?

What changes afterwards?

What does self-harm actually do for me?

- Does it give me relief, control, distraction or a release?
- Does it help me express something I can't put into words?
- Does it help me feel something when I'm numb?
- Is it a way of showing others that I'm struggling?

There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone's self-harm is different.

Understanding your answers helps you and your counsellor explore safer ways of meeting the same need.

ARC Counsellors
won't tell you to "just stop."

Instead, they'll help you get curious
about its purpose, and explore safer
ways of meeting the same need.

The better you understand your
self-harm, the more empowered you
become to change it when you're
ready.

💔 What Doesn't Help

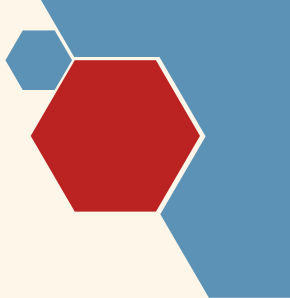
- Expecting yourself to change overnight
- Hiding struggles out of shame
- Believing things will never improve
- Waiting until you're in crisis before asking for help



💚 What Does Help

- Small steps rather than big leaps
- Celebrating progress, not perfection
- Letting trusted people support you
- Building coping tools before you need them
- Remembering that difficult feelings always pass





The Competition Trap

One of the hardest things about self-harm is that it can quietly become something you compare.

You might find yourself thinking:

- "My self-harm isn't as bad as theirs."
- "Maybe I'm just being dramatic."
- "Nobody would take me seriously."
- "Other people are struggling more than I am."
- "If my scars fade, will people think I'm okay now?"
- "Do I have to be in crisis before someone notices?"

Some young people describe self-harm becoming almost like a badge of honour or feeling pressure to prove how much they're hurting. Others say that seeing photos or scars online can trigger urges to self-harm again, simply because their brain starts comparing.

The truth is: Pain is not a competition. There is no prize for suffering the most.

You do not need deeper wounds, more scars or a trip to A&E to deserve support.

Wanting Attention Isn't the Same as "Attention-Seeking"

One of the biggest myths about self-harm is that it's "just attention-seeking."

Let's think about that differently. Every human being needs attention. We all need to feel noticed, understood, cared about and supported.

Sometimes, when words feel impossible, self-harm becomes a way of communicating: "I'm not okay." That's very different from trying to manipulate people.

"If I Stop... Will Anyone Know I'm Still Struggling?"

This is something ARC counsellors hear. Some young people worry that if they stop self-harming, people will assume they're "better" and stop checking in.

Recovery doesn't mean pretending everything is fine. It means learning safer ways to let people know when you're struggling.

Meeting the Need More Safely

If your self-harm helps you cope with something difficult, the next question becomes:

"What else might help me meet that same need?"

Some people have found this helpful; remember, recovery isn't about finding the perfect coping strategy, it's about discovering the ones that work for you.

The Ice Technique

Hold an ice cube tightly in your hand. Notice the intense sensation. Many people find this provides a temporary alternative when urges feel overwhelming.



The Butterfly Exercise

Draw a butterfly (or your favourite animal) on your hand or arm and give it the name of someone who cares about you. The goal is to protect it and allow it to fade naturally. Some young people find this helps create a pause between the urge and the action.



(This was inspired by a recovered self-harmer who came to ARC Counselling)

Create Distance

Self-harm is often impulsive. The longer the gap between the thought and the action, the more chance you have to choose something different. Try simply leaving the room, messaging someone, going for a walk, having a cool shower or getting artistic. Putting distance between yourself and self-harm can make a big difference.



The Support Ladder

Write down: Someone easy to contact, someone trusted, a professional, an emergency support. When things get hard, your brain doesn't have to think. The plan is already there.



Finding safer ways to cope isn't something you have to figure out on your own - support is available to you explore what works for YOU

Getting Support and Who Can Help?



0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk



youngminds.org.uk

Mental health information
and support designed
specifically for young
people.



Call 116 123

Available 24 hours a day.



Text SHOUT to 85258

24/7 text support for
anyone in crisis.



Papyrus HOPELINE247

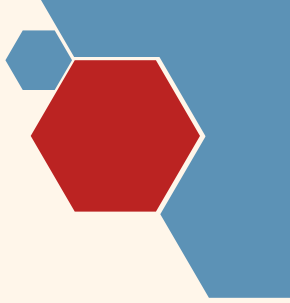
0800 068 4141

Support for young people
experiencing thoughts of suicide
or those worried about someone
else.



Call 111 or visit NHS online if
you're concerned about your
mental health and don't know
where to turn.

These resources are free.



Did You Know?

- **Around 1 in 4 young people aged 16–24 in England report having self-harmed** at some point in their lives. (NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, 2023/24)
- **Almost one third (32.8%) of 17–24-year-olds say they have self-harmed or attempted to self-harm at some point.** (YoungMinds, 2025)
- **Many young people who self-harm never tell anyone**, often because of shame, fear, or worry about how others might react.
- **Most people who self-harm are trying to cope with emotional pain, not trying to end their life.** Self-harm and suicidal thoughts can overlap, but they are not the same thing. (NHS)
- **Feelings of loneliness, bullying, sleep difficulties and low self-esteem are all linked to a higher risk of self-harm.** (NSPCC)
- **Young people with ADHD and autism are at increased risk of self-harm**, particularly when experiencing emotional overwhelm, impulsivity, social difficulties, or feeling misunderstood. (NICE / National Autistic Society)
- **More than 27,000 hospital admissions related to self-harm were recorded among 10–24-year-olds in England during 2023/24.** (UK Health Security Agency)
- **Seeking support early can make a huge difference.** Self-harm is one of the strongest predictors of future mental health difficulties, which is why reaching out matters. (King's College London)
- **Many people who once relied on self-harm go on to develop safer ways of coping and no longer self-harm. Recovery is possible.**





Get in touch



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ARC offers one-to-one counselling to Adults and Young People across Wokingham and the surrounding areas. We provide confidential counselling at our main site in Wokingham, Oakwood in Woodley, schools and GP surgeries across the area.

ARC provides an important role within the community, with referrals coming from other agencies as well as self-referrals.

In addition to counselling, we also offer important support for 16 – 25 year olds through our Youth Access program. This program provides information to young people on where and how to access support, from housing, to work and mental health.

Our counselling services are free to young people under the age of 21 years and low cost for adults. We believe that counselling should be accessible for all and that cost should never be a barrier to better mental health.

We are a charity with over 25 years offering support within the Wokingham area.